



THE URBAN/SUBURBAN SKUNK

Many people consider skunks odorous, obnoxious pests that should be avoided at all costs. However, these animals have some beneficial habits, they kill insects and rodents. The striped skunk is the most common species in California, although the smaller spotted skunk can be a local problem around dwellings. The common skunk is about the size of a plump house cat.

Skunks are not good fighters or runners but possess a strong-smelling gland at the base of their tail. When cornered or bothered, they stamp their front feet in warning and turn to aim their gland at their target. The powerful oily scent can be ejected for about 10 feet. If left alone they will turn and scamper away. Skunks, as well as most wildlife, stay in certain geographical areas as long as the three life sustaining elements are present: food, shelter and water. Without these three items, the skunk will not remain. Skunks eat a variety of food. In spring and summer they eat fruits, berries, eggs, all kinds of insects, small rodents and reptiles. In winter they dig small insects and rodents out of the ground. Their digging leaves little cone-shaped holes. They usually live in underground burrows, which they may dig if the ground is soft. Otherwise, they live in vacant homes of other rodents, hollow logs, rock piles and under houses.

Skunks are nocturnal and are rarely seen during daylight hours. Because they are active at night, many people never see the animals, even in areas with a large skunk population. Skunks will use any sheltered place as a den including woodpiles, animal burrows, under homes, decks, and sheds. Breeding may begin as early as January. Litters are born 9 weeks after conception with an average of 4 - 8 young. The young skunks stay with the female for several months, but usually begin to disperse by mid to late summer. Skunks become a problem when their activities conflict with human interests. When skunks take shelter under homes, decks, or in garages, occupants of the building do not usually tolerate their presence. All skunks have the ability to discharge a nauseating musk from their anal glands. They are capable of spraying their musk several times with accuracy to about 10 feet. Confrontation with pets often results in the pet being sprayed or bitten. Skunks can also cause severe damage to gardens and lawns by their digging activities. While searching for grubs and other subsoil insects, skunks frequently uproot turf and other plants. This damage consists of small pits ranging from 3 to 5 inches across, or sometimes-large sections of sod are rolled back. Skunks are predators and can decimate ground-nesting wild bird populations and local populations of endangered species of small mammals.



Skunks are one of the primary carriers of rabies in California. Approximately 65 percent of the skunks checked for rabies tested positive for the disease during the past 5 years. Rabies is a viral disease that is fatal in mammals, including man and domestic animals (dogs, cats, livestock). It is transmitted by the bite of an infected animal. Rabies is preventable in man and domestic animals through routine vaccination but is not curable after the onset of symptoms. Vaccines developed for domestic animals have not proven to be reliable in preventing rabies in wildlife. California wildlife species have shown an overall increase of 7% in confirmed cases of rabies from 1978 through 1988. In addition to rabies, skunks can carry leptospirosis, listeriosis, canine distemper, canine hepatitis, Q-fever, tularemia, and trypanosome. They are also heavily infested with ticks, fleas, and mites that are known carriers and transmitters of disease.

Skunks are often attracted to residential areas by the availability of food, water, and shelter. They can be encouraged to leave by reducing or eliminating these attractants. Remove unused pet food and water bowls at night, and keep tight fitting lids on garbage cans. Store pet food in animal proof containers. Gardens should be harvested frequently and windfall fruit picked up. Food should never be intentionally left out for wild mammals. Seal up entry holes in and under buildings and decks. Keep pet access doors locked. Slotted metal vent covers are preferable to screen wire in keeping skunks from entering houses through foundation vents. Low backyard decks have proven to be extremely attractive shelters for skunks. They may be excluded by using 1/4 inch grid screening or solid metal flashing. Trench around the perimeter of the deck a minimum of 12 inches deep, insert screening in trench and backfill. Attach top of screening to facade of deck with

nails or fence post staples. This technique may also be used along fence lines to prevent skunks from entering yards and gardens. Before completing final seal on the last entry point on a building or deck, it is wise to make sure no animals are trapped inside. On the night before completing repairs sprinkle flour in the entrance hole, and check for tracks the following morning. If no tracks are evident for 3 consecutive nights, no animals are likely present. You may wish to make a temporary one-way exit using 1/4 inch grid screening. Form the screening into a cone or funnel shape. The large end should be sized to encircle the entry hold and be attached over the hole to the facade of the deck or building with nails or fence post staples. The small end should face away from the building and be 4 to 6 inches in diameter so that skunks can squeeze out of the hole but not reenter. Skunks causing lawn and turf damage may be encouraged to leave by controlling grub worms and other subsoil insects. Chemicals to control these insects may be obtained at hardware or garden supply stores. Remember the safety of your pet when using any type of lawn chemicals. Poultry and egg losses may be eliminated by proper fencing and by keeping well maintained, secure coops. Exclusion of skunks from coops and poultry yards is usually the most practical and effective method to prevent losses. At night, poultry should be kept in skunk-proof sheds or houses. Ideally, poultry should be confined both day and night in a sturdy house combined with a predator-proof outdoors run area. This also provides protection from many other types of predators. Usually skunks are not inclined to break through material such as chicken wire that is intact and in reasonably good condition. Entry is usually made through open, weak or loose places in fences or buildings. Skunks are excellent diggers and may try to gain entry by digging under fences. Following is a check list of measures you can use to protect poultry from skunks: Cover outdoor runs with wire mesh and/or suitable paneling material and fasten securely. If this is not practical, shut poultry indoors at night. Patch or repair all holes or weak places in existing wire or wood coops or runs. Check all edges of overlapping or stapled chicken wire for tightness, and tie or staple securely. Check ground edges of coop for tightness. You may need to bury fencing to a minimum depth of 12 inches. Coop doors should be close fitting and sturdy. Beware of plywood doors which may have substantial warp at corners. To prevent skunks from reaching in and grabbing poultry, night roosting or standing areas should be at least 12 inches away from cracks or wire mesh that is more than 3/4 inch square in spacing. Smaller size wire can be installed near roosting areas. Other birds housed in wire or plastic cages should be kept within skunk-proof buildings at night. An alternative solution is to hang or suspend cages from ceilings at least 4 feet above the floor and 5 feet away from walls or fences.

ODOR

Individual reactions to skunk musk ranges from mild irritation to severe headache, nausea, vomiting, and burning of eyes and nostrils. No diseases are known to be transmitted through the musk. Skunk musk on clothing, outdoor furniture and other objects may be neutralized by a strong detergent washing followed by the liberal use of vinegar or household ammonia and a final rinse. Airing these articles on hot, sunny days will also help. To deodorize in or under buildings: maximize a strong commercial deodorizer, or Neutrolex alpha, or oil of wintergreen to give favorable results. To remove musk sprayed on pets, first rinse the eyes gently with clear water, bathe with a "No Tears" shampoo taking special care around the eyes, then rinse with clear water. You may wish to rinse the pet with tomato juice or a diluted solution of vinegar and water. If you take this extra step, you must then shampoo and rinse the pet again. This treatment may need to be repeated. You may use any over-the-counter eye drops as a final soothing eye treatment. If the skunk bit your pet, take it immediately to your veterinarian.



Animal Care Services will respond to and impound any opossum that is:

- **Injured/Sick/Dead**
- **Has been involved in a bite with a human**

If any of these conditions exist, please call City of Long Beach Animal Care Services at:

(562) 570-7387